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INTENSIVE SPELLING

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The best introduction to this paper is a pair of quotations, the first from a learned treatise on spelling by a great professor: "We do not yet know with any show of accuracy which of these one, two, or three thousand words are persistent sources of error among large numbers of people." The other quotation is the words of a mere high-school teacher: "It has been the privilege of the writer to follow one pupil through the four years' course of English with the one word *benefiting*, only to be compelled to explain the derivation and the rule for doubling ten times to the same individual during the fourth year."

Every secondary teacher *does* know (though, to be sure, he can quote no statistics) which words are persistent sources of error. If you should confront a grade teacher, a high-school teacher, and a professor of rhetoric with the forms *stoped*, *wierd*, and *finaly*, you would get from each the same weary smile of recognition; each one knows that from kindergarten to fiftieth reunion, from Maine to California, from grocer's boy to successful novelist, it is the same three hundred deadly words that betray illiteracy. A college graduate who can't spell *idiosyncrasy* is excusable. College examiners needn't worry if a candidate for admission writes *maintain-ance*—provided he never writes such forms as *noticable* or *occassion*.

This paper is a plea for ceasing to worry about the three thousand; for a bloodthirsty attack on the three hundred.

The writer was fifteen years in discovering that most of his spelling troubles were confined to a few hundred very common words and a few dozen type-forms. All that time he faithfully dictated the thousands—*scythe*, *knead*, *porcelain*, etc. During the first five years he was quite unconscious that he wasn't getting anywhere; during the next five he slowly learned that some forms like *seperate* and *discribe* were deathless hydras; during the last

five he discovered that it was infinitely harder to get rid of *dis-sapoint* and *definate* (and infinitely more useful) than to teach a hundred forms like *musician* and *engineer*. Why more useful? Because the *dis* words are used a hundred times as often. Why more difficult? Because as spelling is at present organized a heedless pupil may slip through the grades writing these common words wrong year after year. A firm, an all but unbreakable habit is formed, which may in some cases defy the most strenuous attack in the high school.

The day will come when every grade teacher will be supplied by his principal with an authorized list of Words That Must Be Started Right. It is criminal to spend time on *banana* or *crystal* until *too* and *their* are habitually spelled correctly *when the writer's attention is on a composition*. They must be paraded on the blackboard, dilated upon, written and sounded with exaggerated emphasis, dictated, returned to and returned to. But even then the work is only begun; until the knowledge is habitually applied *when the main attention is elsewhere* the spelling lessons are vain.

Do you think I rave? This last year I have been observing a class of average boys preparing to take final entrance examinations for college, all of whom had studied Latin for four years, had passed paper A, and nearly all of whom had been strictly drilled in spelling and punctuation for from four to six years. Their most frequent error was writing *to* for *too*. Not, mind you, that the second *o* was carelessly omitted; the nature of the error was usually misspelling. *There* for *their* occurred with enough frequency to drive a teacher insane. *Replys* persisted to the end of the year, and one boy, who had been under my care for six years, wrote *planing* for *planning* on his college paper. His was an obdurate mind; but if for six years before he came to me he had been allowed to exercise the bad habit, he was not entirely to blame for not overcoming it in the next six.

This difficulty of rooting out an old habit, of fixing a new one in its place, of insuring the operation of the new habit *when the mind is busy expressing ideas*, is quite beyond the comprehension of any professor or critical parent. It passes the understanding of the teacher himself. Although at present I regard myself as a spelling

fiend, still I am sure that a decade hence I shall look back upon my present self as mildly unconscious of the forces against which I struggle.

The essence of these forces is always *confusion*. Some psychologist of the future may formulate the mental mix-ups; at present we guess and grope. But our minds must be cleared of the idea that we deal with mere heedlessness. Consider *shepherd*. Every boy and girl is confronted throughout his life with such spellings of the proper name as *Shephard*, *Shepard*, until his mental picture is a blurred and inextricable composite. *Askes*, *fourty*, *villiage*, *dispair*, *shure*, *controle*, *fiew*, etc., are easily referable to parallel correct forms; *minuite* may be due to *biscuit*. Oral confusions account for such mistakes as *probally*, *atheletics*, *supprise*, *enimy*. Of a different sort and more complicated are errors in using suffixes. It is quite impossible for the trained mind to realize the alertness necessary in an immature mind, during the rush of a written test, if the knowledge of altering final letters is to be properly applied. For example, the teacher finds *enjoies*, is inflamed with wrath, wonders if the pupil has any mentality; inquires the next day in class about *replies* and *employs*, and finds that the understanding of the principle is perfectly clear; confronts the pupil with his idiotic *enjoies* and savagely demands whether his brain is larger than a pea; the modest answer is, "I got mixed up." Bright boys, whose accuracy in a spelling test is invincible, will in themes write *ladie's*, *dinning room*, *does'nt*, and be just as puzzled as the teacher when the errors are disclosed. The old ignorance is always slipping in to confound the recently established knowledge. In some form or other misspelling is confusion.

Therefore the first object of intensive spelling is to establish order. "This is invariably done"; "such a form does not exist"; "when must you always double?" "Henry's ought to look as strange to you as snow in July"; "there are only three preterites in *aid*"; "only *ex*, *pro*, and *sub* take *ceed*," and so on eternally, the old "alwayses" and "nevers" being unremittingly presented until they are dinned into careless minds, take root, and crowd out the confusions.

It is the opposite of this plan, it is creating confusion, to present *there* and *their* together, or *seize* and *siege*, or *all right* and *already*.

When you display as a group of freaks *seize*, *weird*, *either*, emphasize them as three of a kind, repeat them and expatiate upon them, then you make one clean-cut impression; for a few in the class that one presentation is indelible. If you then say anything about *siege*, you smudge the mental diagram; for some in the class you may have created indelible confusion. If *all right* gets fervid comment in a recitation (never is that wrong form to be exhibited), then there must be nothing said that day about *already*; for that would be to construct disorder.

Examine your own processes, if you have any memories of that remote period when you had any slight troubles with spelling. Suppose you were in doubt about *cemetary*. Did it help you to pair it with *secretery*? Was it your custom to put dissimilar words together and say, "Now I will remember that the first is different from the second"? Suppose that when you were a bit flustered before a class you had to declare the proper spelling of a word, would you wish mental pictures like these?

(i)	(r)
incompat(a)ble	emba(rr)ass
(i)	(r)
incontest(a)ble	ha(rr)ass

Most of us have to put the similar forms together. Once we have learned "stationery is not used in a cemetery," no embarrassment can make us err with either word. By some mnemonic device we fix the impression of two *r*'s in *embarrass*; by another device, in another brain-cell, we fix one *r* in *harass*; if we pair them, we are lost.

The whole system of intensive spelling is to build groups of words that corroborate each other. *Almost*, *already*, *always*, *altogether* belong together, help each other. *All right* must be kept as far apart as possible in time and thought. "There is no such thing as an adjective in *us*," we must insist, "no such thing as an adjective in *full*"; later we may casually mention *bogus* and *citrus*, or comment on *crop-full*. "Speeches every week" will teach the spelling of two words; "he speaks in a weak voice" will, later, teach two others. But "he speaks a speech" may unteach spelling for life. *Lose*, *move*, and *prove*; *laid*, *paid*, *said*; *exceed*, *proceed*, *succeed*; *divide* and *divine*; he hadn't a *particle* of *principle*; the *principal* man was a *practical* man; *ninth*, *truly*, *argument*; *decision*

and *occasion*—all such groupings help to build up an assured and lasting knowledge.

There is no other clue to the labyrinth of *ie* and *ei*. "Always expect it to be *ie*, unless you know definitely to the contrary." Learn the four cases in which it is *ei*: (1) when the sound is that of long *a* or long *i*; (2) when the sound is short *i* or short *e* (except *mischief*, *kerchief*, *friend*, and *sieve*); (3) after *c* (except *financier*); (4) in five or six freaks: *seize*, *either*, *weird*, *leisure*, *neither*. The *ei* cases may be remembered by a jingle:

- (1) When sound is like long *a* or *i*,
- (2) Or after letter *c*;
- Save *mischief*, *kerchief*, *friend*, and *sieve*
- (3) When like short *i* or *e*.
- (4) *Seize*, *either*,
- Weird*, *leisure*, *neither*.

This is an unlovely and tortuous thing, but any pupil who masters it is freed from one of the greatest of spelling perplexities.

For the past three years the writer has used a little pamphlet of thirty classified lists, containing a total of about four hundred forms. Month after month and year after year the pupils are put through the same familiar pages. Spellers have been practically abandoned. All our spelling time is devoted to trying to fix common forms ineradicably. Even in this we fail woefully. Of course we do. Improvement in spelling can be achieved only in proportion to the cube-root of the effort expended. At the end of the year only ten out of the twenty-five boys in the second-year class could spell all the words in the pamphlet. Nevertheless they were a better trained crowd than we had ever had previously. The most hopeless spellers were missing only 10 per cent of the words. A test of thirty-five words was marked zero if two were misspelled.

It is understood in our grading of themes and written tests that there are three kinds of misspellings: (1) unusual words, (2) words that the ideal pupil would have observed, but to which attention has not been called, (3) words that have been specially dwelt on. Nothing is deducted for the first kind, little for the second, but zero is the only limit for penalizing the third. A third-year pupil who writes *ladys* in an otherwise perfect hundred-word test may

get 80 per cent in September or 40 per cent in June. For the violation of an invariable, familiar, clearly understood rule no marking is too severe. And severity is the truest kindness. It often teaches a stupid boy in October what leniency would leave untaught in June.

There is, I am sure, one advantage in intensive spelling that no amount of spread-out work can secure: it establishes a nucleus. When a boy has reached the stage where *dissappoint* and *finaly* are ludicrous, where they instantly recall the teacher's invective, where they announce screamingly that the writer is a poor ignoramus, then that boy is ready to be more ashamed of *transative* or to detect and reform *apropriation*. As long as he is taught that he is responsible for a vast field of seldom-used nouns he feels abused, he justifies his errors to himself; but when he is strictly liable for only a few square yards he cannot excuse himself. He is then alive to errors; which means that his intellect has been quickened.

Since the above was written I have received a copy of *Concrete Investigation of the Material of English Spelling*, by Professor Jones, of the University of South Dakota, in which he tabulates the misspellings in 15,000,000 words of theme-writing done by pupils in the grades in four states. I subjoin some quotations from his comments on the data.

1. Indeed the very words that give most trouble in spelling are almost invariably found in the second or third grade lists, and faithfully reappear throughout the subsequent years. Over nine-tenths of all words misspelled by the 1,050 grade students are found in these two lists.

2. From the standpoint of usefulness this (second-grade) list is worth many times as much as all the other lists combined.

3. Since these troublesome but useful words are not pointed out and effectively dealt with in these early grades, our handling of the most dangerous spelling material is not efficient, and students go on misspelling, year after year, words that should be mastered in the early school years.

4. Our spelling problem is not so gigantic as it is commonly believed to be, for the reason that a handful of words misspelled over and over by each student has misled us in our judgment.

It is instructive to see how this staid scientific report waxes emotional when it discusses the misspellings of simple and commonplace words. Professor Jones presents a list of "One Hundred Spelling Demons of the English Language." Surely this is an authentic demonology. It needs a propaganda.